

VAISHALI

AND THE INDIANIZATION OF ARAKAN



Noel F Singer

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Cover: A collage depicting Shiva as Bhikshatanamurti (deity of ascetics), flanked by *Dvarapala(s)*, possibly 5th or 6th century CE.

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Any interpretations, forthright or cynical opinions, and errors are, of course, mine alone.

The drawings and photographs, unless otherwise stated, are by the author, as are the comments in square brackets.

Noel Francis Singer
2008

Introduction

This account originally appeared as an article "Sculptures from Vaishali, Arakan", in *Arts of Asia*, July–August 2007, vol. 38, no. 4.

The project initially began in 1999 and by 2006, reams of information had been gathered, threatening to turn the article into a book. As space in any magazine is at a premium, this meant that much of the data had to be *grudgingly* jettisoned and the text ruthlessly edited.

Nevertheless, I was determined to retrieve the valuable data and reweave the scattered strands into a book as I felt it was too significant to waste. Many of the photographs not included in the article were also too valuable to be consigned to oblivion.

Obviously, since the article was published, I have received more pertinent information which necessitated several changes in the present text.

My interest in ancient Arakan had been simmering since the late 1950s, when I lived in Myanmar, but was unable to visit the 'legendary' sites of Mahamuni and Vaishali. In those days, it involved an unpleasant sea voyage, and once there, transport was practically non-existent. Many of the locations, too, were also in the hands of rebel groups and extremely dangerous. A virulent form of malaria was rampant — and still is — so intending travellers beware. Medication, insect repellent and a mosquito net are a must. One cannot be too careful about the food either, even in the best hotels.

Over forty years later, and now living in the United Kingdom, I finally achieved my wish. Disappointingly, during each of my two visits, I came away with almost all my long-held illusions shattered, saddened at the terrible neglect, and the vandalism being perpetrated on ancient religious artefacts by ignorant and misguided men, in particular the Buddhist clergy. There was also extreme poverty in the outlying areas. The total lack of interest from the locals was depressing. Then again, one cannot blame these simple rural folk,

as finding the means to fill hungry bellies is far more important than expending energy on the preservation of mouldy old ruins and ancient artefacts. During my travels in the countryside, it was most distressing to see such abject poverty.

This account of Vaishali does not pretend to be a scholarly work, and despite my lack of academic qualifications, I have tried to tell what is to me a fascinating story which was probably replicated in various parts of ancient Southeast Asia which came under the influence of the Hindu colonists.

The early history of Arakan from 200 to the 900 CE is far from complete and still shrouded in what appears to be an impenetrable haze. Not only have insufficient archaeological investigations been undertaken, it has also been weighed down and sabotaged by inaccurate information by native chroniclers of a later age.

Some foreign writers, too, have either slavishly repeated these fantasies, presented their own interpretations, refuted the findings of others, or else, ignored this early period altogether. For example, ancient Arakan of the Chandras was omitted by George Coedes in his celebrated *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*.

A number of readers may find it surprising that I have not given due weight to indigenous accounts of a later date quoted in this work. This is a deliberate omission on my part owing to their unreliability, permeated as they are with borrowed historical episodes and myths from Buddhist and Hindu India. Although these native sources are claimed to be 'ancient', they probably date from a time after the 14th century. Above all, they had a tendency to fabricate, obsessed with a need to present a realm infused with Buddhist piety of the Theravada School when in fact it was a Mahayana version, together with Brahmanism, which predominated.

As things stand, an immense amount of research and scientific excavation, unhampered by religious bigotry and political propaganda urgently needs to be accomplished.

One occasionally hears of this or that foreign institution planning excavations and conservation, but nothing constructive appears to have materialized in Arakan. Judging by the articles in the Myanmar Historical Commission Journal, attention seems to be focused on Myanmar proper.

This present work is based on the unique lithic inscription of circa 729 commissioned by Ananda Chandra, ruler of Vaishali, together with other epigraphic evidence and iconographic. At this point in time, these are

the only contemporary historical materials available for this early period. One can but hope that before long a fuller picture will emerge when other relevant inscriptions have been excavated.

Chapter One

Background history*

The elongated coastal strip of Arakan (Rakhaing) is situated on the western part of Burma (Myanmar) proper and extends for almost 360 miles. At its widest it is roughly 100 miles, while at its narrowest it is only about 25 miles. On the west is the Bay of Bengal, the region now called Bangladesh is to the north, and on the east are the high Yoma mountains. Man tended to congregate in the fertile river valleys.

What may conceivably be the earliest representation of this ancient land can be seen in a map based on the findings of the Greek scholar Erathosthenes (circa 276–194 BCE), the Chief Librarian of the Great Library at Alexandria. In it, Hindoi or Indoi (India) and Taprobane (Sri Lanka) are indicated. Included are the Ganga (Bhagerathi) River and its Delta, together with part of the curving coastal strip of Arakan. The Yoma range which separate this region from the country now called Myanmar, is depicted as well. Unfortunately, Arakan is represented as a blank space with no identifiable habitation sites.

A chart by Strabo (c. 63/64 BCE–24 CE) which appears to have been based on the above, is almost identical for this region. However, in a later map derived from those of Claudius Ptolemaeus (Ptolemy: flourished 127–145 CE, another inhabitant of Alexandria), the coastline of Arakan has been updated considerably, and the mountain barrier illustrated in detail. Of particular interest is the inclusion of the premier port city of Sada together with another, also on the coast, called Berabonna. The river "Sados Flu" [thought to be the present Kaladan] is shown.

Another map, also based on Ptolemy's researches and published in 1695, identified the Yoma mountain chain as the "Meandrus Mons". In this

* All dates not designated BCE are of the Christian Era. Comments in square brackets are by the author

version, only two cities are named, Sada on the coast, and Triglyphon, situated further inland and to the north.

An additional chart entitled "Geographiae Antiquae" and dated 1818, depicted Sada and Berabonna, together with Triglyphon which had now been relocated to the coast; several versions based on Ptolemy are known to exist.

In those remote days, it is possible that it was in Bharatavarsha ("The Realm of the Sons of Bharata", a fabled Indian ruler) that the earliest name by which Arakan was known was first recorded, and where it achieved notoriety as "Kala Mukha" (Land of the) Black Faces.¹

The *Mahaniddesa* (circa 200 CE) noted that the *Ramayana* (The Adventures of Rama: circa 500 BCE) and the *Mahabharata* (The Great [battle of the] Bharatas: circa 400 BCE) identified it by that appellation, and described its denizens as cannibals, presumably negritos.²

Not surprisingly, the Hindus called them *rakshasa* (demons) as they believed them to be the offspring of men and *rakshasis* (shape-changing female demons) who through their magical powers could metamorphose themselves into delectable maidens.³

The legend of the *rakshasa* filtered down the centuries, for the present-day Rakhaing whose presence was first noted in the region in about the 10th century CE⁴ knew their land as *Yetkhapura* (*Rakshasa pura*) or Kingdom and City of the Demons; although it is unclear where this city-state was situated or during which period it flourished.

Gerini was sceptical of the derivation of *Yetkhapura* from the word "rakshasa", he felt that although Ptolemy in his *Geographike Hyphegesis* (Guide to Geography) had populated the littoral around the Gulf of Martaban with cannibal tribes, he had not mentioned their existence in Arakan.

"The term Rakhaing can therefore be scarcely connected with the tradition of the Raksasas occupying at one time the land, and any such pretended connection put forward is undoubtedly the modern invention of Buddhist monks, anxious to find some explanation for the name of the country."

*Sir Arthur Phayre says that the latter was designated as Rakkha-pura by the Buddhist missionaries from India; but I should like to hear how far back in antiquity this name can be traced. It appears in the Mahavamsa [of Sri Lanka] under the form Rakkhanga at so late a date as A.D. 1592; and in the Ain-i-Akbari at about the same period under the form Arkung."*⁵

Luce, quoting Ptolemy [who in turn was citing Pomponius Mela (circa 43 CE)] on the location of ancient Arakan, said:

*"Descending the coast south-eastwards from the mouth of the Ganges, he names first the Airrhadoi (with the port of Barakoura) [this was presumably in the Chittagong region]; then the country of Argyre ["Silver Land" i.e. Arakan] with [the towns of] Sambra, Sada, Berabonna and Temala [which Gereni believed was Cape Negrais]; then a Cape; then the cannibals of Besynge [thought to be in the region of the mouth of the Irrawaddy River] in the Sarabak Gulf [most likely the Gulf of Martaban]."*⁶

These areas were allegedly inhabited by other savage tribes, such as the Beseidai or Tiladai who lived between India and China, therefore somewhere in present day Myanmar. However, Luce, when quoting Ptolemy, offered conflicting descriptions. While on one occasion he defined the people as "big" of stature and "broad and hairy and broad-faced, white-skinned", further on they are described as "stunted." The *Periplus* had originally depicted them as "pygmies".

Nevertheless, according to Luce "Both Chinese and Greek sources agree in placing, at the beginning of our era, undersized and white-skinned peoples in Burma, and the existence of early trade-routes between China and India."⁸

How reliable is the anecdote concerning the cannibals?

Regarding these man-eating savages, was Ptolemy simply repeating the scare stories of the geographers before him, and the sensational traveller's tales which were liable to circulate in ports of the world? After all, it is a well known fact that humans have a tendency to fabricate, either from sheer ignorance or pure malice.

Revealingly, a location map in Moore's recent work pinpoints numerous fortified habitation sites from possibly before 100 CE in the very areas supposedly being terrorized by Ptolemy's cannibals.⁹

The cold archaeological and scientific facts are these.

Cave paintings and stone implements said to be over 5,000 years old have been discovered in the Badalin ("Shining-as-Mercury") Caves in the Shan States. Older still are the mysterious hunter-gatherers of a prehistoric period called "Anyathian", from the relatively modern Myanmar word *ah-nyar-tha*, meaning a male from the upper part of the country.

Recent excavations have uncovered hitherto unknown finds from locations which have been identified as the Neolithic, 'Bronze Age' and the 'Iron Age'. The Nyaungyan burial site, in particular, has revealed what appear to be unique 'mother goddess' figures crafted out of thin sheets of bronze; the identification of these symbols is still ongoing. Grave goods include decorative ornaments for coffins, polished stone implements, large perforated stone discs designed for the wrists and chest, glass rings, pottery and bronze artefacts.¹⁰ Almost similar examples from these periods have also been reported in Thailand.¹¹

It is doubtful if cannibalism was practiced amongst these people who were certainly not wild savages.

Carbon-dated evidence has revealed that by circa 200 BCE, the Pyu (Piao or Tircul), possibly one of the earliest civilized ethnic groups, were already established within their small city-states in central Myanmar.

One must presume that the civilized and the uncivilized existed within their own territories, with raids and counter raids being undertaken as the centuries passed. It would appear that the more primitive tribes were finally pushed further back into the wilderness, for the Pyu and the Mon, each in their own kingdoms, soon came to dominate the land.

But that is another story.

The first wave of Hindu colonists

To return to what was occurring at the time in ancient Arakan.

In India of the 1st century CE, fuelled by their need for commerce, gold and silver, the initial wave of Hindu colonists undertaking their *samudra yatra* (sea voyages) across the Purva Samudra (Bay of Bengal) began in earnest.¹²

These extraordinarily courageous travellers, composed of merchants, adventurers, artisans, Brahmana, members of the ruling elite and, one must assume, some of their fearless women folk, braved the terrifying and cramped conditions at sea to seek out strange new worlds such as the fabled Survanabhumi and Suvarnadvipa, which reputedly contained unimaginable wealth. Once at their destination, the pioneers founded settlements and overcame the hostility of the local inhabitants. Some of their elite married into the families of local tribal chiefs and in time, by their superior knowledge and skills, came to rule over them.

It was surprising to learn that even before that early date, many of the coastal areas and shipping lanes of the Indian Ocean and the Straits of Malacca were infested by pirates who either killed all on board or sold them into slavery. This meant that for the prudent ship owners and merchants, precautionary measures had to be taken, and a contingent of archers and spearmen hired to accompany these voyages.¹³

By the 3rd century, the coastal regions of Kala Mukha had been settled, with the colonists dominating and coexisting warily with the aboriginal tribes.

The Lords of the Solar and Lunar dynasties from far off Bharatavarsha had indeed arrived.

In the major habitation sites, Sanskrit was the written language for the ruling classes, and religious beliefs were those current at the time on the subcontinent.

Dr. Emil Forchhammer, a Swiss Professor of Pali at Rangoon College, and Superintendent of the newly founded Archaeological Survey [1881] described this fertile region [which was, and is still infested with the deadly malaria mosquito (*Culicidae*)].

*"The earliest dawn of the history of Arakan reveals the base of the hills, which divide the lower course of the Kaladan and Lemro rivers, inhabited by sojourners from India, governed by chiefs who claim relationship with the rulers of Kapilavastu. Their subjects are divided into the four castes of the older Hindu communities; the kings and priests study the three Vedas; the rivers, hills, and cities bear names of Aryan origin; and the titles assumed by the king and queen regent suggest connection with the Solar and Lunar dynasties of India."*¹⁴

Argyre, the Silver Land

Ptolemy, quoting Pomponius Mela, had identified this part of Eastern India as Argyre (Silver Land) as he had been told that it contained numerous silver mines. Its capital was Sada. But since this metal is not found in the region, later scholars found his description perplexing, neither could the city of Sada be identified.

Majumdar, too, could not agree with this location for Argyre and felt that "we might look upon the island of Java as corresponding to Argyre, and there are several facts which speak in favour of this supposition."¹⁵

Fortunately, in 1978 the mystery was partly explained by Mitchiner, who said that the reason it bore the epithet Silver Country was that its govern-

ment acted as a mediator for the export of bullion which originated in Nanzhao (Yunnan) and an area of Myanmar which is now believed to be located in the present Bawzaing area of the Shan States¹⁶ [the Bawdwin mines are another location]. This immense stretch of country in the Shan States was variously under the control of the Pyu kingdoms of Vishnupura (City of Vishnu), Hanlin, and the Varman and Vikrama dynasties of Sri Kshetra, named after the holy city of Puri in Kalinga, and sacred to Vaishnavites.

According to Mitchiner, the silver was taken down the Temalos (Irrawaddy River) to Temala, thought to be near present-day Syriam (Thanlyin), across the river from Rangoon (Yangon); it was later to become part of the Mon kingdom of Ramannadesa.

From Temala, the bullion from Nanzhao was shipped to agents in the eastern kingdoms and to Sada in the Silver Land from where it was dispatched to India and beyond. This precious metal attracted the attention of the Romans, for it is known that sometime during the 2nd century CE, a small expedition sailed across the Aparā Samudra (Arabian Sea) and the Bay of Bengal, and managed to travel to Nanzhao by way of the Irrawaddy River — an incredible and obviously dangerous undertaking.

As to the identity of the capital of Argyre, Ptolemy was told that the Sanskrit name of the ruling dynasty was Chandra, which his informants, using the Prakrit parallel, pronounced Chada. Linguistic difficulties meant that Ptolemy's rendition became Sada, which he also used for the capital.¹⁷

Interestingly, the *Mahaniddesa* also referred to the city as Sada, and said that it was a premier port of call for shipping from Palur in the Ganjam district of Kalinga (Udra or Orissa) and Tamralipti (Tamluk), on the Hugli River, about thirty miles southwest of modern Kolkata.¹⁸

Gerini, quoting from Ptolemy, said that Sada was identified:

*"as the terminus of the sea-passage across the Gangetic Gulf (Bay of Bengal) from Palura [in Kalinga], effected in a direct line from west to east, and covering a distance of 13,000 stadia. It was, therefore, the first port touched at in his time by ships proceeding from India to the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal. Some ships, however, took a more northerly route, and touched at the riverine port of Antibole on the Dhakka or Old Ganges River, before making out for Sada and the Gulf of Martaban."*¹⁹

However, Gerini did not agree with Ptolemy's identification and location of Sada, and was of the opinion that the city was sited at the present port town of Sandoway (Thandwair, with the classical name of Dvaravati) which

is considerably further down the Arakanese coast. He added pertinently that some of the later Portuguese maps were still calling the port Sedoa.

[Gerini's assumption is credible, for although all the maps based on Ptolemy's researches show Sada as being situated on the coast, it is in fact over fifty miles inland. Why would the vessels from India travel laboriously inland, through winding mangrove creeks, and facing possible attacks by pirates, when the present port of Sandoway was more accessible?]

The large sea going vessels from India, known as *mahanavah*, were heading east to other Southeast Asian kingdoms, in particular to Survanabhumi ("Land of Gold"; claimed to be Lower Myanmar and Malaysia), and to Suvarnavipa ("Isle of Gold"), which Majumdar identifies as Sumatra, together with some of the islands in the region. Several interpretations of the exact location of these fabled lands are current. Another name for this region was the legendary Chryse, known to Pomponius Mela, Pliny the Elder and others of an earlier period, and which is now accepted as covering a large swathe of Southeast Asia.

The second period of Indianisation

The second phase of the Indianisation of Arakan occurred from about the 4th to the 6th centuries, by which time the kingdom of the colonists had been well established. One must also assume that by then, the earlier name of "Sada", for its capital, had been replaced by "Vaishali".

As a port city, Vaishali was in contact with Samantata (Tippera-Noakhali region, Southeast Bangladesh), India, Simhaladivipa (Sri Lanka) and other overseas realms. Relations were strengthened by trade and diplomatic connections and the movements of migrants, pilgrims and itinerant craftsmen.

Nearer home, the Chandra rulers were in communication by land and water with the Pyu kingdoms across the mountains in the east, and with the small Mon city states in Ramannadesa.

Collis, who in 1925 quoted his source in good faith, said that the archaeologist, San Shwe Bu, had provided him with a translation from an old manuscript called "The True Chronicle of the Great Image" [the Mahamuni bronze which was located at the earlier capital of Dhanyavati].

"The Chandra kings were upholders of Buddhism, guarding and glorifying the Mahamunni [sic] shrine; their territory extended as far north as Chittagong" [then known as Chatigrama]. "The conclusion to be drawn from this MS is that Wesali

[Vaishali] was an easterly Hindu kingdom of Bengal, following the Mahayanist form of Buddhism and that both government and people were Indian as the Mongolian influx had not yet occurred."²⁰

The uncertainty over the date for the founding of Vaishali

Even though the capital of the Chandras is now accepted as Vaishali, there is as yet no coeval epigraphic evidence confirming it, neither is the term by which they identified their kingdom known. Western scholars have based their identification on the word "Waythali" (Vaishali), a corrupt later version in use by the present Rakhaing and the Myanmar peoples who are incapable of pronouncing the character "v".

If it was indeed Vaishali, Dr Johnston, an epigraphist of Balliol College, Oxford, who translated the Sanskrit inscription (circa 729) of Ananda Chandra, Maharaja of Vaishali, felt that the region had come under the control of the descendants of the [Licchavi] ruling family from Vaishali, Bihar, when they fled from the ascendancy of the Imperial Guptas (circa 300–467).^{21&22}

Johnston's theory is plausible, as the time scale corresponds with the second surge of Hindu migration into Southeast Asia, and the creation of the new Vaishali, when the Licchavi, under Dven Chandra (circa 370–425) established a *Chandra vamsa* (Lunar dynasty); previously the Licchavi claimed to be of the *Surya vamsa* (Solar dynasty).

However, at the present time, different opinions are current amongst scholars as to the identity of the city which Dven Chandra inaugurated. While some believe that it was the older Dhanyavati (meaning "rich as a source for food grains" because of the fertility of the earth), about sixteen miles to the north, others are of the opinion that it was Vaishali.

If we assume that it was the latter, at the location [Latitude 20° 40' 05" North, Longitude 93° 90' East] which was to become Vaishali, there was probably in existence a sizable number of colonists from the subcontinent, making it an ideal choice for the high-born Licchavi.

Then again, if it was Dhanyavati, it is unclear if the Licchavi replaced the earlier ruling house. This was an important site containing the Mahamuni Shrine, with its reputedly miraculous 'living' bronze image of Buddha. However, apart from legendry accounts invented centuries later, there is as yet no evidence of a contemporary nature to suggest that the shrine was already in existence when the Licchavi established the spot as their new capital.

As Sada was mentioned in the *Mahaniddesa*, followed by Mitchiner's interpretation of Ptolemy's 2nd century rendition of "Chandra", perhaps the dynastic name of this older dynasty, too, was Chandra?

Little is known of these early *raja* (s) who ruled at Dhanyavati, apart from the fabricated accounts in later native chronicles which date this dynasty from 600 BCE to 400 CE. Htun Shwe Kaing has gone further and pushed the date for "the First Dhanyavati dynasty" to 3000 BCE, which one must accept as pure wishful thinking.²³

In circa 729 CE, the inscription set by Ananda Chandra provided a list of the long line of past rulers, and the major events which occurred during their time of sovereignty. It stated that as the region was unstable, the monarch Dven Chandra had to subdue no less than 101 kings, presumably local tribal chiefs [this is a common symbolic number used to describe the many races of man, implying that as the conqueror of so many, he was entitled to the status of supreme ruler or Emperor].

Dven Chandra then laid out a *nagaram* (royal city),²⁴ ovoid in plan and measuring 2.7 square miles in area. It was protected by fortifications and moats.

If this was the present site of Vaishali, one will have to speculate that either for sentimental reasons, or on seeing the topography with its vast fertile lands which resembled the locality of their former home, the Licchavi decided to name their new city after it. Vaishali is a derivation of Visala meaning broad, extensive, spacious, magnificent. It was also the name of Visala, the founder of the dynasty, who was the son of Trinabundu of the Iksavaku dynasty, possibly a semi-mythical ruler.

The original Vaishali in Bihar, described as "a small but powerful republic governed by nobles of the Vriji family", was one of the six great cities of India visited by Buddha.²⁵ It is situated about 27 miles north of Pataliputra (Patna) and contains the Licchavi Relic stupa and the Abhishek Pushkarini or Coronation Pond of the later Vaishali rulers.

Fa-Hsien and Xuanzang, the Chinese pilgrims who were in India between 401-410 and 629-645 respectively, travelled to the older "Fei-she-li", and reported that although the region was very fertile, this celebrated site was already in ruins.

Whether it was Dhanyavati or Vaishali, centuries later in Arakan, the Ananda Chandra Inscription of 729 [henceforth to be known simply as the Inscription] enthused that because of its magnificence the newly built but

unnamed capital, "*saundarya hasinam*" (laughed at) the grandeur of Amaravati, the Vedic deity Indra's fabulous capital in *Svarga* ("Light of Paradise").^{26&27}

Gutman has suggested that the city built by Dven Chandra was not Vaishali but Dhanyavati, and dated the former to the 6th century; this was based on surviving archaeological evidence such as sculptures.²⁸ Earlier, she had suggested the 7th century.²⁹

If this is the case, it had to be the splendid city of Dhanyavati which supposedly expressed amusement at the opulence of Indra's *Svarga*.

On the other hand, if Dhanyavati had been constructed by Dven Chandra sometime between circa 370–425, who then was responsible for relocating the capital to a site named Vaishali?

At the moment, no one appears to agree and each expert offers a bewildering array of dates and theories.

Vaishali founded in circa 2nd century BCE

In 1972, Aung Thaw, Director of Archaeology, recorded that "a Hinduised dynasty was ruling at Vaisali (Wethali) about the 2nd century B.C."³⁰

Vaishali built in 327 CE

The writers Myar Aung and Shwe Zan have claimed that Vaishali was built in 327 by Maha Taing Sandra, who is not listed in the Inscription, and that this was the year in which the great Pharagri image was commissioned and installed at the capital at the instigation of his consort Thupaba Devi (see Chapter Eleven).³¹ Conversely, the late San Tha Aung, insisted that the year was 370.

Vaishali established early 6th century

If the first half of the 6th century has been recommended by Gutman for its foundation, there were only two *maharaja*(s) listed in the Inscription for this period. They were Bhuti Chandra (circa 496–520) and Niti Chandra (circa 520–575).

In all probability, it was the latter, for the Inscription indicated that he reigned for fifty-five years. There was also peace in the realm, and more importantly, the economy appeared to have been strong [this may be attested

by the fact that the coins issued by him are the most common in the Chandra series to have survived].

But that was all.

There is no mention in the Inscription of a new capital being built during his reign.

The mystery is, why was such a vitally important subject as the relocation of the capital not confirmed and identified in the text? Although it recorded the construction of a city, frustratingly it failed to name or date the event.

To confuse matters further, the later Rakhaing chronicles have also claimed a date for the establishment of Vaishali — in fact a baffling number.

To quote but a few.

One source³² asserted that Vaishali was built by the monarch Vasudeva [not listed in the Inscription]. Another said that Vasudeva and his nine brothers took over old Arakan and established themselves at Dvaravati [now Thandwair, also known as Sandoway during British colonial times; the city reputedly had a habit of floating off into the air and had to be tethered to the ground by a massive chain].

Vasudeva is also another name for the god Krishna, who is the eighth manifestation of Vishnu.

Providentially, we have Gutman's version regarding this mysterious Vasudeva. She explains that he was the focus of the Bhagavata cult [connected with the worship of Vishnu or Krishna] adopted by the Gupta monarchs, which the Chandra rulers felt obliged to imitate, doubtless to bolster their self importance.³³

According to Dallapiccola, in India the cult later amalgamated with the Vaishnava faction of the Pancharatras.³⁴

One must assume that somehow this information filtered down through the centuries to later Rakhaing chroniclers who were totally unaware of its significance, and presumed that Vasudeva had to be the name of a very important monarch, and was therefore the ideal candidate for the founder of Vaishali.

Vaishali constructed in 788 CE

An indication of how these supposedly ancient Rakhaing chronicles could get their facts terribly wrong is revealed by Collis, who was equally ignorant of the piece of information he was quoting.

*"The area now known as north Arakan has been for many years before the 8th century the seat of Hindu dynasties; in 788 A.D., a new dynasty, known as the Chandras, founded the city of Wesali [the dynasty then] came to an end in 957 A.D., being overwhelmed by a Mongolian invasion."*³⁵

[The date could not possibly be 788, for the Chandra dynasty had ended by circa 600. Yet, according to Kyi Khin, who was doubtless quoting one of the later Rakhaing chronicles, it was Maha Tain Sandara who rebuilt the old [and presumably abandoned] city of Vaishali in 788, and that it was destroyed in 957.³⁶

Vaishali built in 790 CE

Forchhammer, quoting the *Sappadanapakarana* (*Sarvasthanaprakarana*), claimed to be "an ancient Arakanese manuscript of great value" added another twist to the story:

*"In the year 152 B.E [Buddhist Era] (A.D. 790) the new city of Vesali [sic] was founded by the King Mahataingcandra on the site where the old town had stood."*³⁷

As the chronicle did not identify this "old town", Dhanyavati is out of the question as it is nearly sixteen miles to the north. Another source, however, said that this "old town" was Ramavati ("The City of Rama").

Vaishali created in 887 CE

Aung Tha U, who failed to reveal his source, made the surprising claim that Vaishali was founded by Maha Sandra in 887 CE.³⁸ He was obviously not aware that the oldest section of the Inscription [the text on the east face of the pillar] was already in existence by the reigns of either Bhumi Chandra (circa 489–496) or Bhuti Chandra (circa 496–520) in *Vaishali itself*, and that by 887, the Chandra dynasty had long ceased to exist.

The by now bemused and mystified reader will be relieved to learn that at this point in time all theories are tentative. Until archaeological and scientific investigations have been conducted thoroughly, and centuries of

entrenched and bewildering myths created by later native chroniclers which have influenced some naive foreign scholars, eradicated.

It will probably be many years before a competent archaeologist or historian, will be able to unravel this mystery and present an acceptable account of this period.

Regarding the founding of the earlier Dhanyavati, as Gutman has suggested a period sometime between 370–425, one must also presume that this should be accepted as the date for the construction of the Mahamuni Shrine on Sirigutta hill, thereby causing the chroniclers, invariably monks of a later age, to spin in their graves.

These pious men have stated, and with great authority, that the dedication of the shrine and its bronze icon was attended by none other than Buddha himself, who 'activated' the icon by breathing 'life' into it, and named it the Candasara image.

One is informed that on that fabulous day when the bronze image was created, among the distinguished guests were none other than Indra and Visvakarman (Tvashti), the celestial architect and creator of Indra's *Swarga*, who was also responsible for casting the image, and for the construction of the shrine to house it.

This preposterous claim is still accepted by the entire country.

As supernatural beings, if Indra and Visvakarman were endowed with such impressive magical powers, why was there a need to actually *cast* a bronze image? Could it not have been magicked out of thin air?

Then again, why were Hindu gods attending and taking part in a Buddhist ceremony?

If as it is now claimed that this centre of worship was of great importance at the time, why was it not mentioned in the Inscription?

The Rakhaing who are of Sino-Tibetan stock, did not arrive at their present homeland from Western China until about the 10th century CE. However, their quasi-historical records which are secondary material compiled centuries later, and liberally sprinkled with anachronisms, now maintain that they have been in *their* country since 5000 BCE. They also claim, quite seriously, the early Indian dynasties of Dhanyavati and Veshali as their own — *peopled by the Rakhaing race*.³⁹

Chapter Four

The Ananda Chandra Inscription

The contents of all the previous records pale in comparison to that of the Ananda Chandra Inscription, the crowning glory of the Sri Dharmarajandaja *vamsa* (dynasty) (circa 649–circa 729). Although none of the dedicatory records include a date, the names on the coins and the significant list of the rulers in the Inscription have helped scholars to identify the royal donors.

Had it not been for Johnston and the Indian epigraphists before him, the contents of the Inscription which remained inaccessible for well over a thousand years, would never have been known. Although the Rakhaing chroniclers, monks and laymen alike, were incapable of deciphering the Sanskrit text, they were not above providing fictitious names and accounts of the rulers of this and other ancient sites.

While the Inscription, which consists of sixty-five verses [seventy-one and a half lines] has provided important material regarding dates and locations, its compiler could also be infuriatingly terse at times. Neither the name of the kingdom or the two premier city sites of Dhanyavati and Vaishali are mentioned; it simply states that a *nagaram* (royal city) had been established.

Since nothing comparable to this eleven foot high monolith exists in Myanmar, during my visits in 2002 and 2005, I was distressed to find it neglected and the text flaking. Though it is four sided, only three faces are inscribed in a Nagari script which is allied to those of North-Eastern India and Vanga (Bengal).

As the monolith is cemented to the floor, each of the four panels has been designated according to the cardinal direction in which it faces; this is for easy reference.

And now for some deduction games on the age of the inscription on each panel.

The panel on the east face

While Johnston merely said that the script on the eastern face was the earliest,¹ San Tha Aung felt that it could be dated to sometime between 300 to 600 CE.² Alternatively, Shwe Zan was less vague and claimed that the record could be credited to either Bhumi Chandra (circa 489-496) or Bhuti Chandra (circa 496-520).³ Gutman has also suggested that it was similar to the type of script used in Bengal during the early sixth century.⁴

The panel on the north face

Although Johnston suggested a date for the type of script on the north panel, he mentioned that several smaller inscriptions in Bengali characters, had been added during the tenth century. Gutman, on the other hand, felt that the principal text in this section was of the mid eleventh century.⁵ Then again, Kyi Khin in his Report, indicated that the first four lines on the north panel were of the 7th century, and that the short inscriptions at the base belonged to the 9th century.⁶

Regrettably, the contents of the eastern and northern faces have not yet been fully investigated, and the situation has reached a critical point as the surfaces are fast deteriorating. Half-hearted plans to have the texts studied and translated have not materialized.

[The profound apathy which appears to grip most civil servants in the relevant departments may be one of the reasons. One must also assume that there are no competent epigraphists available to attempt unravelling the inscriptions. By all accounts, resources are now focused on the archaeology in Myanmar proper, with early Arakan and old Mon thrust to one side].

The panel on the west face

Fortunately, this segment which is reasonably preserved, is a *prasasti* (record of a ruler's qualities and achievements) of Ananda Chandra and his predecessors, including some earlier monarchs who are thought to be legendary. Johnston dated the type of script to the sixth or early seventh century,⁷ while Gutman felt that it was from the earlier part of the eighth century.⁸

This priceless document not only lists the personalities of each monarch, but also some of the major events of every reign, and is the focus of this work.⁹

Since the pillar which is now sited at the Shitthaung pagoda [the stupa which [allegedly] contains eighty thousand Buddha images], the Inscription has variously been called either the Shitthaung Pillar, the Mrohaung [another name for the town of Mrauk U] Inscription, or the Ananda Chandra Inscription.

As the earliest texts on the eastern panel may be attributed to either Bhumi or Bhuti Chandra, the pillar should in theory be named after one of them. However, for our present purpose, it will henceforth be referred to as the Inscription, since we will be concerned primarily with the period of Ananda Chandra's reign.

So far, the early history of this inscription pillar is a blank.

It was first mentioned in the Rakhaing chronicles when it was conveyed from Vaishali on the orders of king Mong Ba Gree (reigned 1531-1553) to his Shitthaung pagoda at Mrauk U, nine miles to the south.¹⁰ Various dates are given for this event, such as 1534, 1535 and 1536.^{11,12,13}

The heavy pillar, together with its supplementary fixtures, were doubtless placed on specially constructed carts. Another source said that the king's elephant was used to carry the monolith to Mrauk U; surely a near impossible task for an animal to undertake, trudging for nine miles with this immense load?¹⁴ The north entrance of the pagoda then became the Inscription's new home. On the death of Mong Ba Gree in 1553, the pillar was neglected, and thereafter for over four centuries abandoned and finally used as a gatepost.

[When more progressive times prevail, the inscription pillar should be returned to its original site in Vaishali. As things stand, at this moment in time, this is too much to hope for].

But this is no ordinary epigraphic record, it was once part of a ceremonial *torana* (portal) bristling with mystical connotations. The components forming this doorway were the pillar itself, a lintel, an octagonal column and a swinging gate.

With regard to the age of the first three objects, Gutman's interpretation appears to be the most reliable. She has suggested that as the material used was red sandstone, she proposed a date anterior to the middle of the seventh century. Evidently, after this date its use fell out of favour in Arakan.¹⁵

Next on the throne was **Dharma Sura** (possibly named after the monarch of the Survasenas whose capital was Mathura on the Yumuna River; Sura was also the name of a king of the *Chandra vamsa* (Lunar Race). Dharma Sura reigned circa 636- 649. As his first name Dharma suggests, he appears to have been of a religious inclination. During his reign the realm enjoyed prosperity. He ruled for thirteen years, and being a devout monarch he entered *Svarga*.

This brief dynasty which held sway for forty-nine years may have ended with Dharma Sura.

The interregnum

It is a tremendous shame that apart from the document relating to Ananda Chandra, the rest of the texts engraved on various parts of the monolith have not been translated.

Johnston felt that many of the smaller inscriptions contained lists of names, which he assumed were of local lords, two of which he could decipher. These were the mysterious Prabha Chandra and Bhupalah Sri Candakeyura Varmma.⁴

Perhaps, one day, all will be revealed as to who these personages were, but one should not hold one's breath.

The Sri Dharmaraj-andaja vamsa (dynasty) (circa 649-729).

A new and powerful ruling family then took command of the situation in the kingdom.

Johnston felt the above dynastic name implied that their ancestry could be traced back to Brahma and Manu, the latter being the ancestral progenitor of the ten lines of kings of classical India. It inferred they were of the noble *kshatriya* (warrior) caste.⁵ Sircar added that Sri Dharmaraj-andaja *vamsa* meant a succession of distinguished and righteous rulers belonging to the *Dev-andaja* clan (the deity Garuda (the sacred Brahminy kite: *Haliastur Indus*) which is also the vehicle of Vishnu. This was indicated and affirmed in the Inscription by the Garuda motif; the Gupta monarchs also employed this device).⁶

And for the first time, thanks to the compiler of the Inscription, we have evidence of the identity of the new ruling family and their origins.

In verse 64, he clearly states that Ananda Chandra was a descendant of the Saiva-Andhra monarchs⁷ [presumably of Vengi ?] whose kingdom was located between the Godavari and the Krishna Rivers, and close to the Bay of Bengal.

Johnston was unsure, and felt it was a dynasty based somewhere in the Deccan [an immense region of middle India].

It is interesting that as late as the 7th century, ambitious members of some of India's princely houses were crossing the Bay to Arakan with the intention of carving out a kingdom for themselves. And they succeeded.

The founder of this new dynasty was **Vajra Sakti** ("The Thunderbolt of Karttikeya") reigned circa 649-665.⁸ In addition to having been descended from the Saiva-Andhra kings, he is also described as one who was of the Deva family, indicating that his mother was a princess of the Deva dynasty; we have here a scion of two prominent ruling houses. Unfortunately, this particular Deva dynasty cannot as yet be traced; the only Devas this author is aware of ruled in the kingdom of Harikela, part of Samatata, and which came into prominence well after Vajra Sakti's reign.

Vajra Sakti who was in power for sixteen years was renowned for his dedication to religion, and therefore, according to the text, comparable to a Vajrin (Indra); had he been of the Theravada persuasion, as is now suggested, would such a comparison have been used? The mention of *danasiladisamyukta* indicated that he was a follower of the Mahayana school of Buddhism⁹ — doubtless with a dash of Brahmanism.

His successor, who reigned from circa 665-701 (thirty-six years), was the devout **Sri Dharma Vijaya** (named after one of the Saiva-Andhra monarchs who was [according to the Inscription] one of his ancestors; he could also have been called after a ruler of Ayodhya who was of the *Surya vamsa* (Solar Race). Vijaya means victory and Dharma Vijaya indicates a person who had overcome human weaknesses.

This monarch was a pious devotee of the "Three Jewels", and it should be noted that when he passed away, he entered not *Svarga* but ascended into *lokasukham Tusitam* (Tusita heaven).

References to the "Three Jewels" and "Tusita heaven" reveal that he, too, was a Mahayanist, which San Tha Aung fervently denies. In fact, Rakhaing chronicles identify Dharma Vijaya as a Theravada Buddhist and the Convenor of the Fourth Buddhist Synod allegedly held at Vaishali, in Arakan [see

Chapter Eleven for further details on this incredible piece of Rakhaing religious spin].

And here, too, thanks to Mitchiner's researches, can be quoted the surprising and additional information to Dharma Vijaya's long and successful reign. Mitchiner has been able to prove, by numismatic evidence, that this monarch had expansionist tendencies, backed presumably by military might. He marched into Samatata and seized that kingdom from its Kara rulers [Dani said that Pattikera was the classical name of the capital of Samatata].

The annexation of this kingdom will certainly be news to Rakhaing historians who will no doubt claim another triumph for a member of 'their' race.

It would seem that Dharma Vijaya ("The Victorious One") was aptly named.

Infuriatingly, little information is available as to when this significant event occurred, or the length of time Samatata was under the yoke of Vaishali. But with the death of Dharma Vijaya, which Mitchiner believes to be circa 680 [as opposed to Sircar's circa 701], in Samatata power passed into the hands of the Khadgas who founded the kingdom of Harikela¹⁰ [they were in turn replaced by the Devas].

With the loss of its rich vassal state, Vaishali probably began its slow decline.

Unusually, the Inscription then revealed the relationship between two rulers.

Narendra ("Monarch of Men") Vijaya (circa 701-704) who reigned for two years and nine months, is identified as the son of Sri Dharma Vijaya. Narendra Vijaya may have been a youth without progeny, for the line of succession then reverted back to the son of Vajra Sakti, the founder of this dynasty.

Johnston was uncertain of the new king's title and thought that it was either Viranarendra Chandra or Sri Dharma Chandra. Sircar interpreted it as Sri Dharma ("Upholder of the Religious Law") Chandra (circa 704-720). This monarch, who was the father of Ananda Chandra, is described as having descended from *Is-anvaya* meaning that his forebears were royalty; Johnston read this as "*Isa*" meaning Shiva.

The text described his attainments in glowing terms and indicated that militarily he, like Dharma Vijaya, was dominant. He reigned for sixteen years,

However, during my visits in 2002 and 2005, enquiries among the villagers revealed they had not seen any.

According to Mitchiner, the economy of Vaishali prospered until the 6th century, thereafter the route of the silver trade bypassed the kingdom to Samatata, further north, causing an economic downturn locally. Nevertheless, he also said that during the reign of Sri Dharma Vijaya (circa 665–701) Vaishali extended its sovereignty to Samatata where his coinage was in circulation.³

If there was indeed a decline, there was no hint of this in the confident tone of the Inscription, perhaps the silver trade had been replaced by a more lucrative commerce in rice for which the land is still famous. The text implied that under Ananda Chandra it was a prosperous realm, and that many religious buildings were constructed and lavish gifts bestowed on religious establishments at home and abroad.

Structures

Amongst the ruins of Vaishali, the prevalence of dressed stone bases for wooden pillars reveal that the majority of the structures, religious and secular, were of timber. The carved depressions in the stone sockets indicate that the columns tended to be square, with a deep rounded centre inserted into the base for stability.

More substantial materials were employed on *devaprasada thirthika* (religious edifices) such as the Buddhist stupas and the Brahmanical temples. While the earlier buildings were constructed by *sthapati* (architects) from the subcontinent who no doubt were versed in the *Sthapatya veda* (science of architecture), their descendents evolved indigenous styles as evidenced by the decorative stone fragments excavated.

Gutman mentioned in her thesis that one of these builders left behind at the Mahamuni shrine a beautifully cast iron plummet, similar to a specimen now on display in the British Museum. As the latter, datable to the sixth century CE was excavated from the Surma riverbed in East Bengal, the former, too, may have originated from somewhere in that region. Although this author was told in 2002 that this important instrument was now in a monastery at Kyauk Taw, sadly, all traces of it have disappeared; it is probably now in some foreign collection.

By the time of the Inscription in 729, the places of worship in Vaishali would doubtless have increased.

A dedicatory inscription of Vira Chandra Deva (reigned circa 575–578) stated that he had constructed one hundred stupas. Considering that he ruled for only three years, building work would have been frenetic. Then again, these structures were probably votive stupas of brick or stone, about four to eight feet high, some of which have survived. Models of this type can still be encountered all over Eastern India, especially at the Mahabodhi temple, Bodh-Gaya.⁴

Other monarchs from this dynasty, and the ones which followed, also commissioned shrines and temples, since it was an established tradition for a ruler to build at least one religious edifice during his reign. As the region had been under the control of several dynasties, the number of Brahmanic temples and Buddhist stupas were probably considerable. This assumption has been confirmed by San Shwe Bu who observed in the 1920s that the area was “full of ancient monuments now mostly hidden by jungle.”⁵ Sadly, few now remain as the bricks and stones have since been salvaged and put to other uses.

Regrettably, even though none of the buildings of the Vaishali period are extant, one can obtain an idea from a few surviving models of the type of Buddhist structures which once dominated the skyline of the old capital. The November–December 2005 issue of *Arts of Asia*, page 122 (no. 41), contained an illustration of a replica of a superb bronze shrine, which though incorrectly described as early 18th century, is of the late Vaishali period, or possibly earlier. As the architectural design is comparable to that prevalent in Orissa, it indicates that some architects from that region were responsible for many of the structures in Vaishali.

The convex-sided *shikhara* is crowned by a *amalaka*, a globular grooved finial with ribbed sides like the Indian gooseberry (*Emblica officinalis*), the cardinal points are decorated with smaller facsimiles. These *amalaka* have also been incorporated on to surviving smaller stone stupas of the period. The graduating roof is in five tiers, with the first and largest being ornamented by rows of tiny kneeling figures depicted in the act of paying homage. Other decorations consist of lines of quatrefoil motifs. Buddhas, either standing or in *bhumisparsa mudra* within *kotthaka* (s) (gate-chambers or porches) are flanked by elegant *dvarapala*(s) while other divinities which appear to be of Mahayanist origins, occupy niches.

This superb object was originally installed in a relic chamber of a pagoda built by royalty, but had fallen victim to desecrators of relic chambers, no doubt organized by an antiques dealer in Yangon, and now languishes in a private collection abroad.

Previously published artefacts from this period have been unimpressive, but this exceptional example proves beyond doubt that there were craftsmen capable of creating splendid works of art.

Models of shrines and Buddha images claimed to be of the Vaishali period have also appeared in *The Buddhist Art of Ancient Arakan* by San Tha Aung in his enthusiastic zeal to push back the antiquity of the city, oblivious to the fact that the architecture and iconography all date to a time *after* the 12th century.⁶ Just because these objects were discovered at Vaishali does not necessarily validate them as being of pre 8th century provenance. The former capital was still a provincial outpost and a place of pilgrimage well into the 14th century, but by then Brahmanism and the Mahayana form of Buddhism had been replaced by the Theravada version.

Understandably, by the time of the Inscription, many of the older religious structures built by former rulers were already in ruins. The text stated that Ananda Chandra had undertaken their restoration, indicating that conservation of sorts appears to have been known; in the process it also gained the much sought after religious merit for the pious restorer.

Arakan is lashed by monsoon rains from the Bay of Bengal for several months each year, and perhaps the brickwork, despite its stone facing, was substandard. This is very much in evidence at the excavated sites where the surviving masonry reveals large bricks stacked one above the other in a haphazard manner. Similar shoddy workmanship can also be seen at the contemporary Pyu city sites in Myanmar proper.

Ananda Chandra was not only a restorer of ruins, he was also a munificent patron of Mahayana Buddhist and Hindu institutions. All those endowed by him were prefixed with his name, including an undisclosed number of *vihara* (s) (monasteries) for the Buddhist *Arya-Sangha*. These were registered as Anandodaya *vihara* ("Monastery of Ananda, the Compassionate") and staffed by *dasa* (male) and *dasi* (female) slaves; land and cattle were allocated for the use of the entire monastic community.

He also built a substantial *matha* (priory) for the Brahmin priests which he named Anandamadhava; this was near the residence of the *Brahmana* of

In both surviving sculptures, male and female wear their elaborately dressed long hair, secured by diadems, in a large bun on top of their heads. The earlobes are weighted down by heavy cone-shaped earrings, reminiscent of those seen in sculptures from early Cambodia and Indonesia. Jewelled ornaments are worn. The costumes are not complex.

Although the workmanship is unsophisticated, nevertheless the robes, accessories and hair styles are invaluable as they represent the mode of dress at court at the time these images were carved.

Among the other deities on view is an image of either Avalokitesvara or Vishnu, although its four arms are missing, the *padma*, one of its attributes has survived.

Many of these sculptures are not the accumulation of centuries, but are the work of a master and his assistants, and were probably undertaken at about the same time. This is indicated in the details, such as the features, costumes, jewellery and elaborate hairstyles which are all identical.

The portrait of Bhikshatanamurti

One superb piece identified by Gutman as a Bodhisattva, has had several interpretations foisted on it by recent Rakhaing writers. Shwe Zan, in particular, is adamant that it represents the legendry Sanda Thuriya, the alleged builder of the Mahamuni Shrine to house the bronze image of Buddha. This is despite the lack of an original inscription identifying the sculpture as such.

"See what you *want* to see" appears to be the maxim amongst the inhabitants of Rakhaing Land.

On inspecting this superb carving, a competent scholar will immediately notice the pair of *kundala* (earrings) which it sports, and which do not match. This identifies it as a representation of Shiva in his aspect as Bhikshatanamurti, the patron deity of ascetics. While one earring symbolises Shiva's *linga*, the other, round and perforated, represents Parvati's *yonis*.

Bhikshatanamurti is adorned with a superb *hara* (necklace), and an equally splendid waist band. A long beaded *yajnopavita* [a type of sacred thread] hangs down to the knees and is taken up at the back. The diaphanous *dhoti* is secured at the hips by a belt. A sash is draped across the thighs and knotted stylishly at the right hip, from where it falls in graceful loops — a typical Gupta affectation.

The glory of this sculpture is in its exquisitely tranquil face and elaborate hairstyle. While the rest of the head, which is backed by a large halo, is covered in small curls, framed by an ornamental *keshabandha* (forehead band), the long hair from the crown has been tightly braided and arranged in three tiers of loops. The style is reminiscent of those in use in the early kingdoms of Cambodia; part of the *coiffure* of a seventh century head of Hari-hara (an amalgamation of Shiva and Vishnu) from Prasat Phnom Da and now in the Musée Guiment, Paris, sports a similar design.

Regrettably, for people such as Shwe Zan, their self imposed tunnel-vision precludes them from widening their knowledge regarding Hindu iconography or the Brahmanic gods. Anything Indian is usually looked down on by Rakhaing Buddhists who feel immensely superior. This superiority, which the Myanmar are also guilty of, can be compared to the way the Raj sahibs and memsahibs treated their native subjects.

Three mysterious deities at Oak-pon-taung

Less than a mile to the east of the Mahamuni Shrine, is a range of hills, one of which is called Oak-pon-taung ("Hill-of-the-mound-of-bricks"). The descriptive title indicates there were once ruins here, perhaps a monastic complex. Conversely, there may have been kilns where bricks were made. When I visited the spot in 2005, several stone architectural fragments, large decapitated images of Buddha, and bricks, were being excavated by the monks of the nearby monastery.

There was also a newly built shrine containing three mystifying figures, which on closer examination of their ornaments, revealed the work to be from the same period as the sculptures at the Mahamuni shrine. Regrettably, and to my intense irritation, the trio had been insensitively renovated, thereby obliterating the original details.

Earlier in 1988, a chapter in *Myauk U lan hnun* had mentioned "several ancient stone images" which could be observed at the foot of this particular hill. As it described the sculptures as being "*seik htu*" ("stuck-into-the-earth-and-erected"), the expressive phrase implied that they were to be seen as they had been left for centuries, either standing or lying on the ground.

In 1988, the carvings were obviously untouched and in their original form. The abbot of the present monastery then decided to take matters in hand and

have the trio 'brought up to date' so that they now look brand new and covered in cheap gold paint.

When I complained — as I usually do when confronted with such desecration- the young 'guardian' of the shrine looked incredulously at me, and could not understand what all the fuss was about. After all, as far as he was concerned, by performing this 'meritorious' restoration, an otherwise damaged collection of sculptures had been elevated to a pristine condition — this is the present attitude of the Rakhaing and the Myanmar — even among the educated.

As the identity of the trio is no longer known, the monks have expediently provided them with the epithet "*Bo Bo Gyi nat yoke myar*" (Great Grandfather spirits); this is a popular title by which unidentifiable divine beings thought to be 'ancient' are recognized throughout the country.

Who did these figures originally represent? Could they have been moved from the Mahamuni shrine at some point in time, or was there a separate cult centre at the bottom of this hill?

These are questions which need to be answered.

Apart from the usual nonsense, no one at the site could provide any satisfactory information.

A notice board dated January 1, 2003, warned pilgrims:

"Scented water must not to be sprayed on the images; pebbles are not to be placed in their hands; food offerings are prohibited; candles must not be lit; no graffiti on the walls".

The figures had evidently been remodelled recently and the shrine opened to the public.

It was clear the abbot of the monastery did not want the sculptures to be propitiated by Buddhist pilgrims, as they were once Hindu deities of some sort and not Buddhist spirits. Had the pilgrims done so, God knows how their actions would have effected their spiritual well being - something I should have asked the abbot!

I was at the Mahamuni Shrine in 2002, but had no knowledge of the existence of these statues. Had I visited the present site then, perhaps I may have had the opportunity to photograph the trio in their original form - and now it is too late.

The Rakhaing craftsman who undertook the 'restoration' had covered the rough stone surfaces in plaster. Whether he retained the original *mudra* of each or had changed them at the direction of the abbot is anyone's guess. At present, the position of the hands of the trio look remarkably neat, as if deliberately rearranged to form an artistic and complementary 'set'. All three have one of their hands cupped, as if it was meant to hold either a bowl or an object. The gestures are quite unlike any of the carvings at the Mahamuni Shrine.

Fortunately, the restorer had preserved some of the identifying features which can also be seen on the corresponding Mahamuni sculptures. These are the distinctive diadems, huge earrings, the strange wing-like appendages behind the shoulders, the ample neckband, armlets and the characteristic belt with its curious buckle-like loop arrangement in the centre. On the other hand, if the images had each been originally sculpted with a rounded back slab, similar to their counterparts, these appear to have been removed.

At the Mahamuni Shrine and its environs, full scale systematic excavations and research, unhindered by present biased Buddhist beliefs and superstitions, invariably orchestrated by the local monks and trustees, need to be undertaken urgently.

Endnotes

1. Gutman, "Between India and Southeast Asia" etc., p.12.
2. Forchhammer, *A Report on the History of Arakan*, etc., p. 14.
3. Gutman, *Burma's Lost Kingdoms* etc., p. 34.
4. Chan Htwan Oung, "The Mahamuni Shrine in Arakan", pp. 262-265, and San Shwe Bu, "The Story of Mahamuni", pp. 225-229. Other Rakhaing sources also claimed that the image was destroyed.
5. Thaw Kaung, *The Selected Writings of U Thaw Kaung; The Mahamuni*, p. 133. He was quoting Gutman, *Burma's Lost Kingdoms* etc., pp. 7-10.
6. Seckel, D., *The Art of Buddhism*, p. 159.
7. San Shwe Bu, "Notes and Reviews: The Story of Mahamuni", *JBR*, p. 228, 1916.
8. Aung Tha U, *Rakhaing Yazawin*, p. 135.
9. Myar Aung, *Thamaing-dair-hma Mrauk U* etc., p. 134.
10. Tun Shwe Khine, *A Guide to Mahamuni*, p. 10, 1994.
11. Aung Tha U, *Rakhaing Yazawin*, 136.
12. *Ibid*, p. 137.
13. *Ibid*, pp. 137-138.
14. Gutman, *Burma's Lost Kingdoms* etc., p. 35.
15. *Ibid* p. 35.
16. Forchhammer, *A Report on the History of Arakan* etc., p. 6. [sections from Forchhammer's account were plagiarized by Tun Shwe Khaing in his *Guide to the Mahamuni*, 1994.

Chapter Thirteen

The Buddhist Council Hill at Vaishali

On arrival at the site of the former capital, one runs immediately into controversy.

A little to the north east of the present village of Vaishali is a seventy foot high hillock known as Thanga-yana-tin-kon ("Hill-where-the-Buddhist-Council-was-held") it was here, according to Rakhaing chronicles that the Fourth Buddhist *Maha Sangiti(s)* (Great Council) was convened in 638 CE;¹ a claim which is pure religious propaganda from a later age, and a confused one at that.

According to local accounts, the event occurred during the reign of Thiri Dharma Wizaya, a name which possibly equates with Sri Dharma Vijaya (reigned circa 665–701) in the Inscription, in which case the dates do not correspond. According to Mitchiner, this was the famous conqueror who annexed and extended his authority to Samatata in Bengal.

If we are to accept the date 638 as shown in the local chronicles, it should place this event at the time of Dharma Sura (circa 636–649) of the Inscription.

Unfortunately, all the dates in the Rakhaing chronicles cannot be reconciled with those based on evidence accepted by international scholars.

Regarding these Buddhist Councils, the sequence of events is as follows [several versions, together with dates, are known, and this is but one.]

The First Council was held under Mahakasyapa, at Rajagriha, in modern Rajgir, Bihar, in 473 BCE.

The Second Council under the auspices of king Kalasoka, also known as Kakavarnin, at Vaishali, Bihar, in 336 BCE.

The Third Council was organized during the reign of Ashoka, at Pataliputra (Patna) sometime between 274–236 BCE.

The Fourth Council under the patronage of Kanishka (circa 78–101 CE) , the Kushan king, in Kashmir.

Historically, the Fourth Council was conducted not in the kingdom of the Chandras, in Arakan, but by the Theravada Buddhists in Sri Lanka. The Mahayana Buddhists, whom the Theravadins considered 'heathens' then organized their own event either at Jalandhar or Kashmir in about 100 CE.

In Arakan, there is here either a deliberate attempt to mislead, or to be more charitable, confusion, on the part of the native chroniclers over the association of the words "Vaishali" and "Buddhist Council", leading them to take for granted that the location was *their* Waythali. Over the centuries, the vast majority of the Rakhaing historians had probably never heard of *the* original Vaishali in India, believing that their Waythali was the only one.

It is unclear why the Rakhaing decided to assign 'their' council as the Fourth.

As stated above, what they failed to realize was that the site where the original council was held in 336 BCE was at Vaishali, Bihar, after Buddha's *parinirvana* at Kusinagara in circa 486 or 483 BCE, and it was designated the Second Council [even at Vaishali, Bihar, it is still not known in which part of the city this event took place].²

More importantly, that this so-called momentous occasion was held in Arakan is not recognised in other Buddhist countries.

Although the true facts are known today, such distortions continue to be fostered by unscrupulous monks in an attempt to draw pilgrims and, more importantly, their donations, to the locality.

Here it must be said that San Tha Aung who normally would not have hesitated in bringing such a significant event to the attention of the English speaking world, was obviously aware of this charade, and thought it prudent not to include it in a chapter on the history of the Buddhist Councils. His comment was simply:

*"These were the Four Great Councils held in different part[s] of India after the parinirvana of Buddha."*³

According to U Khaymarthiri, the present abbot at the Thanga-yana-tin hill, the supposed Council at Vaishali in Arakan was attended by 1000 monks



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